

THE APPROPRIATION OF NATURAL OBJECTS FOR SYMBOLIC CODE, AND THE
REALIZATION OF NATURAL LANDSCAPES FROM MANMADE SYMBOLS

A CREATIVE PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ART

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Statement of the Problem

Where does the line between symbolic representation of a natural form and subjective presentation of the same object begin? This creative project explores the concept of taking natural objects and forms and transitioning them into a method of communication. The work will flow in two main directions; I will begin by creating symbolic codes using natural objects like birds and human figures. I will then develop a system of natural mapping to explore the concept of collaging maps that will determine boundaries for abstract landscapes. Through the use of these two different yet connected methods of imagery I plan to bring resolution to my query.

The symbolic codes and the cultivated, abstracted landscape will come together within my body of work layering and building into each other. This will make the ebb and flow of the natural versus subjective representation more apparent. I will allow for hints of the opposing concepts to appear in direct contrast to each other to make the dichotomy something evident. Having this will also give way to a sense of unification within the body of work as a whole. The consistency of how the materials are used as well as the symbolic codes within the work will allow for this sense of cohesion to stay consistent and create a buildup of the overall underlying concept. That symbols can be created and claimed from natural objects through observation, but at the same time, structured, manmade symbols can just as quickly become representations of a natural construct.

This project is meant to engage the viewer in deciphering their own truths from the images presented. Throughout the body of work, I will engage and challenge the viewer to interpret what is being presented. My body of work will be titled in ways that direct my audience towards an understanding of the images being presented. Through my creative work, I want to present my findings from this personal exploration of the creation of symbols.

Review of Influences/Literature

The completion of this creative project showcases my thoughts on the appropriation and reapplication of natural versus manmade symbols in a finalized body of work. Through the creation of this work, I have developed my own visual vocabulary which I have honed through a variety of outside influences, both visual and theoretical. Artistic influences for my creative body of work have spanned from contemporaries such as Jasper Johns and Anselm Kiefer, to the work of the Chinese Song and Yuan Dynasty landscape painters. Alongside the development of my visual project, I have also been cultivating the subjective reasoning behind the work. The development of my own ideas is influenced by my study of the appropriation and interpretation of hieroglyphics, the development of symbolic Chinese landscapes, and the psychology behind the interpretation of titles for artwork.

I decided from the beginning of this project that I was going to focus on using encaustic wax as my main medium. This was a material that I had only been using for a short period of time, so during my initial research, I focused on finding a painter who used encaustic. Jasper Johns' influence in my work is most evident in my understanding of the treatment of the material (Image 21.) Encaustic wax, while a medium that has been used since ancient times, has not held as much sway in the contemporary art world due to cost and convenience. The work of Johns is an exception to this trend and his use of the medium has given me a variety of techniques to consider. His attention to the innate quality of the wax, how one is able to imbed objects, and create texture and detail were some of the first things I incorporated into my own work. Imbedding objects has become an integral part of my process, allowing for there to be multiples of an identical image within a painting. This gives strength to the concept of creating a symbolic vocabulary that can be recognized by the viewer with little difficulty. Using familiar objects, specifically the maps in my work, was something I had borrowed from Johns' work as well. Whereas Johns used objects with heavier symbolic weight, such as the American Flag, I

focus on the act of appropriation of a familiar symbolic structure without focusing on a deeper agenda behind the symbol in question. Having seen some of Johns' work in person, I also focused on emulating his deft treatment of the material on the smaller scale as opposed to just the overall view of the painting. Small detail work that may not be noticeable upon first glance is a fundamental part of the paintings I have been developing, from small insertions of symbols and objects to the embellishment of a carved line. These techniques flow over into my use of my other main medium, acrylic paint, which is resilient enough to handle the similar techniques I have utilized with the wax.

Visually I have also drawn influence from the paintings of Anselm Kiefer, who has a habit of using non-archival material (Image 20.) His flagrant disregard for the traditional need for a permanent medium struck a chord with me during the creation of my own work. I had already been exploring the concept of using supplies that are considered temporary, such as using tar paper for a painting ground. The other main draw to his work for me was the overall aesthetic of texture and the emotive painting quality. Each of Kiefer's paintings has a strong charge of emotion behind them, and he makes that apparent in his presentation. Creating artwork, for me is a very personal process and my paintings are meant to communicate my thoughts to the viewer. The use of abstraction allows viewers to easily interpret the work, but without meaning being completely clear cut. I did not want to create simple illustrations, but instead abstracted vignettes that are charged with meaning.

As my paintings progressed, I began to focus not just on the creation of symbols I had appropriated from natural objects, but the incorporation of existing manmade symbolic structures, namely maps. Through the use of maps, I delved into the creation of fabricated landscape determined by territorial restrictions, such as state lines. I created my own system of pulling manmade borders into new natural boundaries for my fabricated landscapes. The peaks and structures I began to develop were highly reminiscent of Chinese landscapes from the Song and Yuan Dynasties. I was able to draw reference to the overall structure of their landscapes to

discern how my own settings could feel as natural as possible. I have also been heavily influenced by Eastern art as a whole in terms of mark making, having the brushstrokes be highly prominent, and my hand to be heavily apparent.

While crafting the conceptual side of this project, I have made certain to take into account the historical relevance of my chosen subject. Symbols have played a large role in the art world, and they have a wide range of historical, religious and cultural meaning. The concept of appropriating an existing symbolic language is a common occurrence, and even more so when the exact nature of the symbols is a mystery. Pictograms of many different cultures have been studied over the years by outside sources and often with little-to-no knowledge of their exact meaning. The desire to create naturalized language and symbols is a compulsion that exists throughout the world, and the only desire coming close to this is the outsider's desire to interpret ancient pictograms. I have decided to bring my own interpretation and play into this creation of an unknown natural code. I have used representational forms taken directly from nature, as well as abstracted forms to achieve this goal. Entwining these two different sets of symbols throughout my body of work, I want my audience to feel the same desire to interpret meaning within the presented imagery.

Chinese landscape paintings became more and more influential as I began to study the meaning and representation behind the images (Image 22.) The original intent behind these works coincides closely to my own goal of having the landscapes act as a symbolic, rather than representational form of imagery. The Song Dynasty paintings were initially considered more direct representations, but the hidden meaning of class structure represented in the hierarchy of the scene must be considered. This symbolic form of imagery became even more apparent during the Yuan Dynasty when many artists took their craft to a new level. Instead of simply implying class rank, especially since many had been removed from the higher class at this point, artists created work that was more introspective. Painting was used purely for self-expression and the artists made their own code from natural objects.

Coming full circle, the intent of this project is to communicate with viewers and entreat them to interpret the symbols being presented to them on their own. The concept of having control over how an audience views a particular image is difficult, especially considering postmodern thought and Roland Barthes ideas on "The Death of the Author." Through extensive research, I have discovered that the title of a work of art consistently directs viewers towards its meaning. The connection between title and image can give an audience preconceived notions about a particular work of art and allow for a form of interpretive control. This is not an exact science, but the method is solid when presenting an image that is unknown to the audience. Taking this into consideration has allowed me to prepare accordingly to get proper reactions and response for the titled artwork.

The process of creating my final body of work, focusing on the appropriation and reapplication of natural versus manmade symbols, has been an enlightening one. My own visual vocabulary was directly influenced by both theoretical and purely visual sources. The visual influences stemmed both from a desire to better use my medium of encaustic wax, and to have an emotive quality present in the paintings I created. My subjective reasoning behind the work was fueled by my study of symbolic imagery spanning the globe from the appropriation of ancient pictograms to Chinese landscape. The understanding of how titling an image affects how a viewer understands the painting was also important to the completion of my art. This completed project encompasses the full fruit of my work to create a clear symbolic language and seamlessly intertwine it with an imagined natural landscape.

Description of Artwork

Creating paintings is a process that begins when one decides what medium will work best to convey the desired imagery. When starting this project, I chose to work primarily with encaustic wax, and used acrylic paint as my secondary medium. I chose these painting options due to their fast dry time and flexibility, which would allow me to create work quickly with fewer limitations. The other reason for working this way was the compatibility of structures that could be used with these types of paint. I built all of the painting panels I used in this project by creating a cradle frame out of poplar wood and attaching a smooth panel to the top. This stable base structure allowed me to mount nontraditional material for a painting ground; for example, I could use tar paper, a product normally reserved for roofing material. With the tar paper's distinct tooth and ability to melt similar to the encaustic wax, I was able to obtain unique textures each time it was employed. My final reasoning for using these particular mediums is the ability to get similar painting effects. These two types of paint can be used to create thin layer washes or thick opaque textures. The end goal was always to create a cohesive body of work. In order to accomplish that, I felt that my paintings should be compatible, even if I was using two very different forms of paint.

Painting with encaustic wax is an art form that has existed since ancient times. The concept is to create imagery using molten beeswax imbued with carnauba wax, pigment, and varnish. This mixture is able to strengthen the fragile beeswax, give it color, and allow it to be polished to a shine when cooled. The encaustic wax acts as both a medium and a seal, holding the pigment and preserving the image. So long as a painting is not exposed to extreme heat or cold, the encaustic wax can endure for long periods of time. This durability also extends to objects submerged and imbedded into an encaustic wax painting, a technique I took advantage of many times throughout this project. Encaustic wax also allows for manipulation like carving

and scraping even after the paint has set. This can give way to a completely different form of mark making in a painting.

In comparison to encaustic wax, acrylic is a much newer form of medium developed around 1934. It is a water soluble paint that is created with acrylic polymer emulsion and pigment dispersion, which dries into a hard water-resistant plastic. The paint can also be affected by other pastes and additives that can create gloss or matte finishes, and a wide variety of textures. Possibilities for adjustment are nearly endless and this flexibility allows me to obtain my desired effect of emulating encaustic techniques. Acrylic is also able to allow for objects to be imbedded. The main difference between the two mediums is what can be changed once the paint sets. Acrylic can be covered over quickly after it dries, but a placed mark cannot be changed; carving is also impossible when the paint is dry.

Throughout all of the work that I created for this project, there is a consistency of color and technique. I focused on the use of bright jewel tone shades, accented by hints of white and black. The base coat of each painting started with an opaque layer of color. The paints allowed for color to be mixed on the surface, giving an overall dynamic feeling to the paintings. The overlying layers were built up with texture and scumbling, the process of applying paint from a dry or cool brush on a textured surface allowing for texture to build on areas where the paint gets caught on higher areas of previous paint, with dry, or in the case of the wax, cool brush techniques.

Developing the content for the artwork in my creative project allowed for me to experiment with methods for creating a cohesive body of work. The paintings I created developed in two directions from the same concept. All of the artwork includes natural objects and symbolic code. However, part of the work was created starting from an image focused solely on the symbolic code with the appropriated landscape added second, while the other portion of the work came from the precise opposite direction. The work has an overall consistency since by either method they come to a similar resolution point. I found by branching

out into these two different directions while creating the paintings, I was able to make fresh and interesting work.

The first group of paintings I created for this project originated with the symbolic code. The entire group can be best described by looking at two examples of this work. *Lost Reference* (Image 1) was created on a tar paper ground, giving the image a unique texture and appearance. The imagery began with the large bird form being laid out as a central point, and smaller bird forms being carved into the background to mimic writing. The work developed from here with the addition of an imbedded map, which gave form to the imagined landscape in the background. I decided to marry the two concepts together further to also include birds created from a cutout map in the image, to echo the first carved small birds. The other example, *Writing Exercises* (Image 2), is a painting that directly focuses on the development of the bird symbols as a form of writing. The primary symbol stands out as it is the original form delineated by the submersion of the cutout bird image into the wax. I then went back into the collage and transcribed the symbols in the same practice we would write the alphabet. I memorized the original shape and then copied it down multiple times, carving into the background wax. This painting was also accomplished on a tar paper surface and finished with the landscape form emerging in from the side. The other artwork that fell into this category was created using similar techniques.

While developing the bird symbolic code, I was also creating a symbolic code focused on using human figures (Image 3.) These abstracted forms--which I have named the hero, heroine, priestess, and villain--are used in the artwork called *Narrative* (Image 4.) This work consists of many small panels that are grouped together in collections of twenty five works. Each set is presented in grid format and meant to be read as an overarching group, like a mural made of small partitions. The intent behind the artwork is to present a narrative using the abstract human symbols without direct illustration. The work incorporates the imagined landscape forms that recall the images I created with the maps.

Finally, the paintings I developed using the method of working from a map to create a landscape and then adding in the symbolic code to finish could best be described by examining three separate paintings. The first, *Cutout* (Image 5), is a large-scale encaustic collage started with the creation of a peak structure in the foreground out of imbedded maps. The bird symbol was cutout from within this form and repeated in the upper corner of the composition. To finish the painting, the landscape was echoed with a background landscape and a scattered application of paint to represent the sky. The application was purposefully patchy with the intent of allowing some of the wood paneling to continue to appear through the wax. The painting *Ranges* (Image 6), on the other hand, completely covers the base wood panel with a layer of maps. The landscape depicted was once again determined by the lines presented in the maps. The paint was applied in a layered fashion to hide much of the maps presented underneath, allowing only a few areas for them to show through. The largest of the acrylic works I created is called *Layers* (Image 7.) These two paintings are a diptych that explores creating a feeling of multiple points of view of the same landscape. The maps are once again used to create the landscape, first as the actual landform in the top panel, then as the skyline, which defines the base land form in the bottom panel. The bird symbols tie together the two paintings acting as a key. In comparison to the artwork that started with the symbolic code, the images started with maps are created with an asymmetrical balance and allow for far more of the base painting ground to be seen.

Creating this artwork has allowed me to come further in perfecting my painting skills. I will continue to work with and expand upon the techniques I have used in this creative project.

Conclusion and Exhibition Statement

The completion of this creative project has benefitted me greatly as an artist in both a visual and scholarly sense. I have come away from this creative project with a better understanding of painting and how to develop a complete body of work. Through the artwork I have made, I was able to experiment with different materials and come away with techniques I will continue to use in the future. The research I accomplished while completing this project has given me an important foundation, one that I plan to expand upon as I continue to create artwork in the future. The progress I have made by coming to the resolution of this creative project has prepared me to continue working and improving as a painter in the future.

Reaching the next level of skill and improving my craft have been my main goals as I have worked through this project. I was able to accomplish these goals through dedication to the completion of these paintings. I have worked consistently on creating a large number of artworks that I could then edit into a successful show. Through diligence and consistent work for the past three months, I have created a complete set of paintings that are able to embody the idea behind this project. The support of my committee has also been a huge impact on the creation of my paintings. With the guidance of my chair, I have honed my painting process and come away with a consistent work flow.

Coming into this project, I decided I would work with mediums that would allow for experimentation and rapid development. Through making paintings with encaustic wax and acrylic paint, I was able to achieve both of these requirements. The opportunity to work with these mediums at the same time allowed me to gain greater insight into how to achieve similar effects using these two vastly different types of paint. Both the encaustic wax and acrylic paint can hold texture and allow for objects to be imbedded. The ability to achieve similar forms of mark making with these mediums made it possible for a greater degree of cohesion in this body of work. These two types of paint also made it possible to work with non-archival material to

create painting grounds. The flexibility of these mediums allowed me to reach a new level in my development as an artist.

While the technical side of this project was critical, the concepts behind why I made the artwork are just as crucial. Creating paintings with the intent to communicate with a viewing audience has played a large role in my research for this project. I have been studying the concept of creating pictograms as well as the idea of appropriating existing symbols and repurposing them. Through this investigation, I have been able to understand how to develop and present my symbolic code. I have also gained a greater sense of insight on work that I was using purely as an aesthetic influence. The history behind Chinese landscape paintings in particular made this change, and my artwork benefited from a better understanding of their underlying symbolic meaning.

Embarking on a creative project is a journey that brings about growth for an artist. Through my own experience, I have come to a better understanding of how and why I choose to make my paintings. The process of creating the work allowed me to understand different materials and experiment with painting techniques I had not tried. While on the conceptual side of my process, I gained knowledge that allowed me to create work that embodied the messages I want to communicate with the viewer. The culmination of this experience has prepared me to continue on my path to becoming a successful professional artist.

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Appendixes



Image 1
"Lost Reference"
Medium: Encaustic Wax
Size: 25"x27"



Image 2
"Writing Exercises"
Medium: Encaustic Wax
Size: 6"x24"

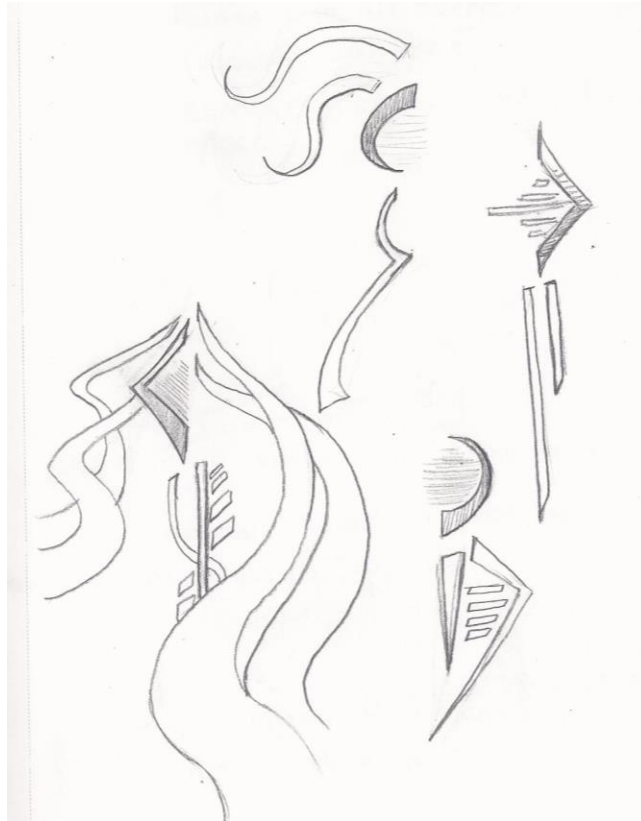


Image 3
Human Symbolic Code
Left to Right: Priestess, Heroine, Hero, and Villain



Image 4
"Narrative"
Medium: Encaustic Wax
Size: 100"x30"



Image 5
"Cutout"
Medium: Encaustic Wax
Size: 2'x4'

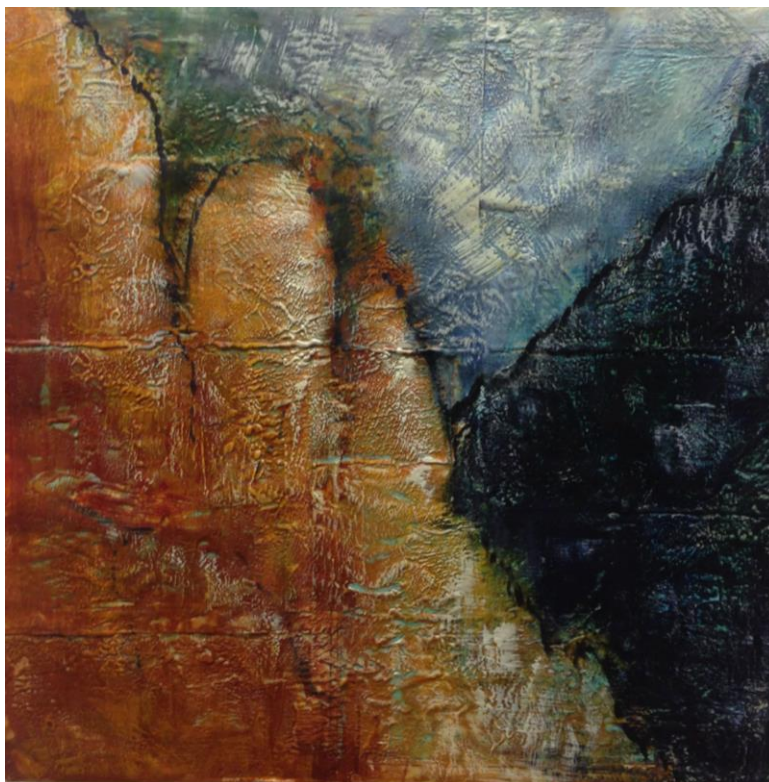


Image 6
"Ranges"
Medium: Encaustic Wax
Size: 2'x2'

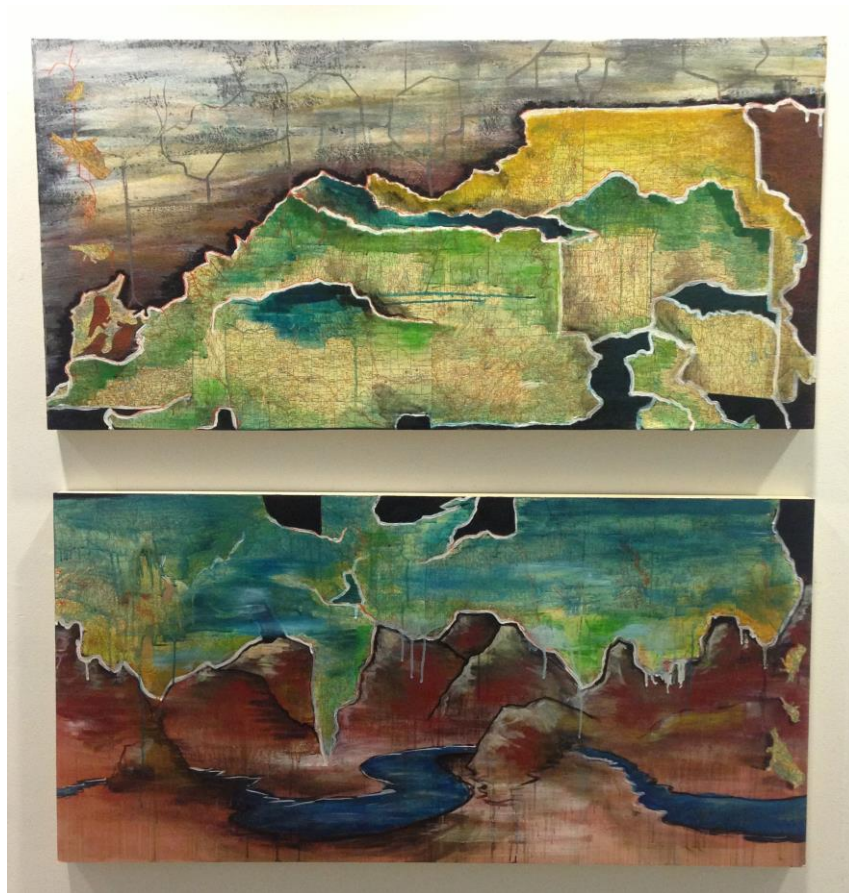


Image 7
 "Layers"
 Medium: Acrylic Paint
 Size: 4'x 4'

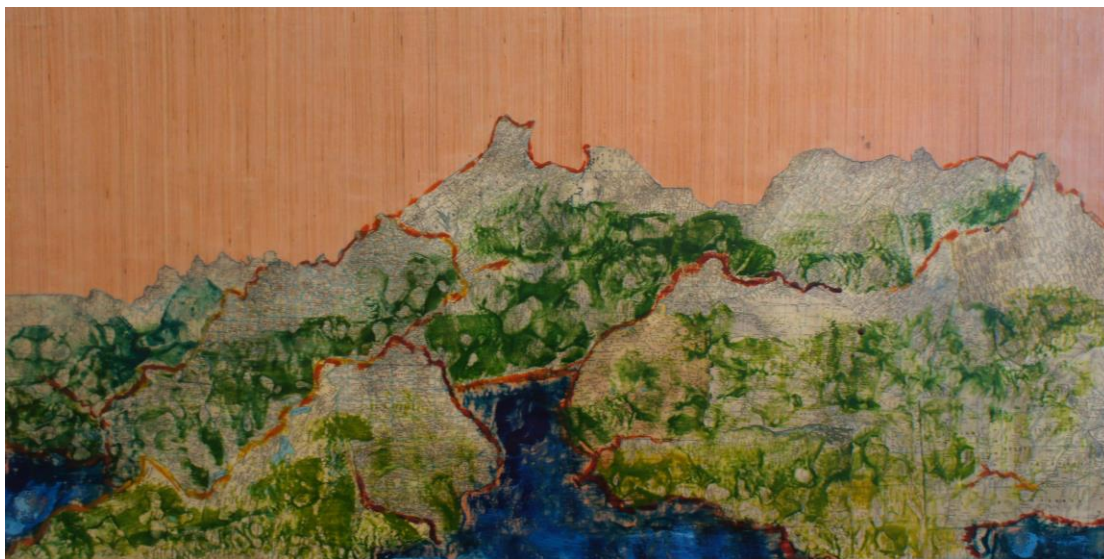


Image 8
 "Retreat"
 Medium: Encaustic Wax
 Size: 2'x4'

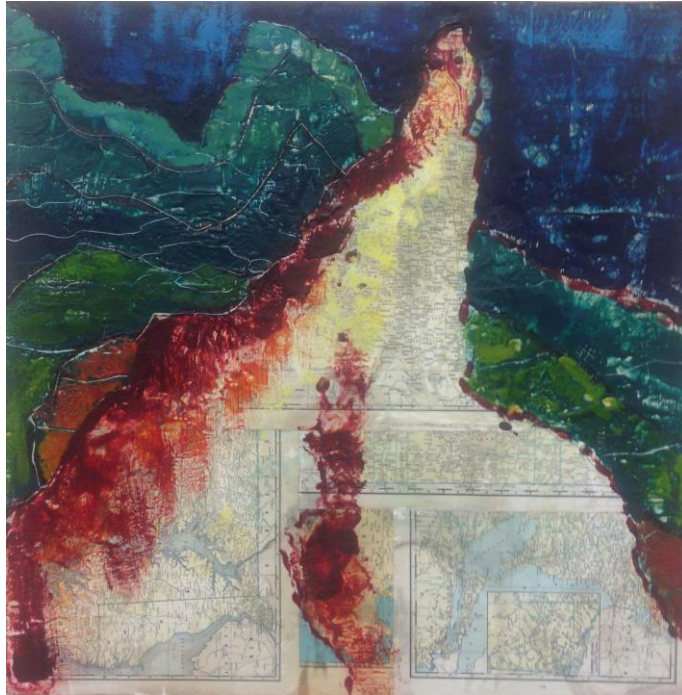


Image 9
 "Altitude"
 Medium: Encaustic Wax
 Size: 2'x2'

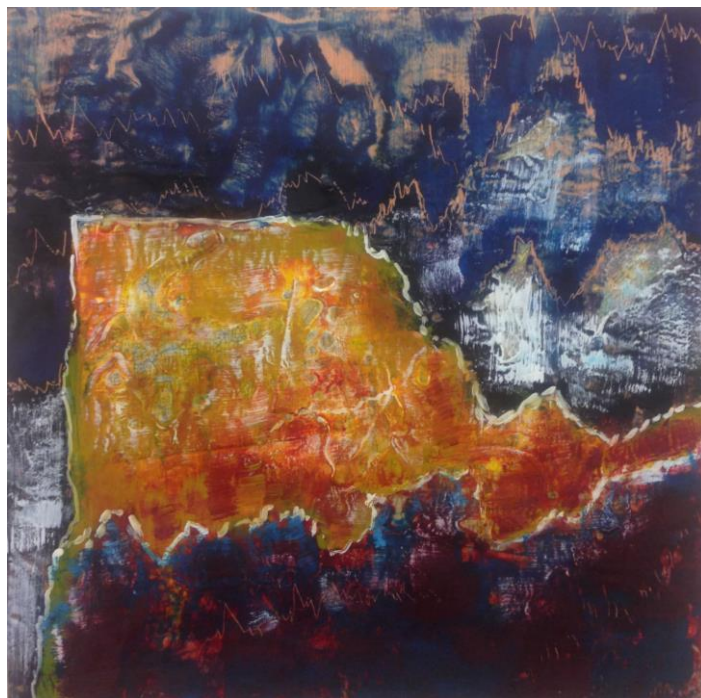


Image 10
 "Plateau"
 Medium: Encaustic Wax
 Size: 2'x2'



Image 11
 "Dunes"
 Medium: Encaustic Wax
 Size: 2'x2'



Image 12
 "Signals"
 Medium: Encaustic Wax
 Size: 6"x24"



Image 13
"Vacancy"
Medium: Encaustic Wax
Size: 6"x24"



Image 14
"Rising"
Medium: Encaustic Wax
Size: 4'x2'



Image 15
"Coat of Arms"
Medium: Encaustic Wax
Size: 2'x2'

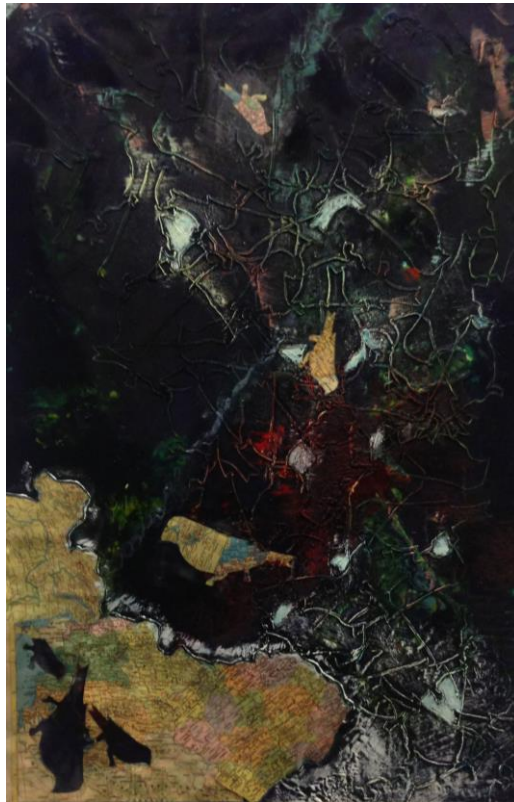


Image 16
"Map"
Medium: Encaustic Wax
Size: 16"x27"



Image 17
"Scales"
Medium: Encaustic Wax
Size: 18"x24"

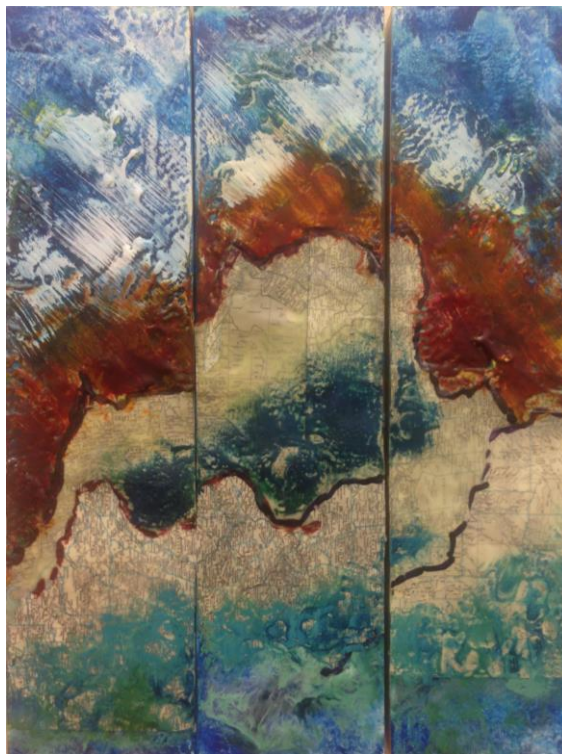


Image 18
"Elevation"
Medium: Encaustic Wax
Size: 18"x24"



Image 20
 By: Anselm Kiefer
 "Bohemian Lies by the Sea" 1996
 Medium: Oil, Emulsion, Shellac, Charcoal, and Powdered Paint
 On Burlap
 Size: 75¼"x221"



Image 21
 By: Jasper Johns
 "White Flag"
 Medium: Encaustic, Oil, Newsprint, and Charcoal on Canvas
 Size: 78 5/16"x120 3/4"



Image 22
"Scholar Viewing Plum Blossoms"
By: Unidentified Artist
Period: Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368)
Medium: Hanging Scroll; ink and color on silk
Size: 37¼"x11½"